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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the current state of the high school psychology curriculum and suggests an alternative program combining a graduate program for teachers with an emphasis on teaching adolescent development. There are three approaches to teaching psychology currently; scientific, personal, and a compromise between the first two, using a current issue viewed according to psychological theory and methods. The teachers, certified in social studies only, are academically unqualified. Enrollment figures doubled between 1960 and 1979 with the growth trend likely to continue. An alternative program could be a graduate training program in the psychology of adolescent development examining adolescent concerns not handled by other subjects and showing how those concerns can be dealt with using scientific principles and research. There is little incentive for this because teachers are already certified and state education departments and school boards are retrenching rather than offering new programs. However, 11 out of 21 teachers at a Marist College Psychology Day evinced interest in graduate psychology courses and one half of the graduating classes at Marist College and Vassar liked the curriculum and were interested in matriculating. As a result, Marist College offered teachers a graduate course entitled High School Psychology in the spring of 1979. (CK)

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HIGH SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGY

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Background

Current State: Curriculum

There is general agreement that there are two basic approaches to teaching psychology; 1) the Scientific and 2) Personal Adjustment (White & Kingston, 1975), (Schumacher, 1976), (Stahl, 1975). The scientific type course follows the contents of a general college introductory psychology text. Such an approach includes the biological, social and methodological areas of psychology. The purpose of the course is to prepare college bound students for an undergraduate general psychology course. The second approach, which is more popular according to White & Kingston (1975) relies less on a text e.g. (Sorenson, et al 1971) and uses a variety of references on relevant topics. The course includes such issues as: mental illness, drugs, sex, personality, etc. The purpose of the course is to promote self understanding and insight. The approach might be classified within psychology as the applied field of clinical psychology.

Reservations about each approach have been voiced by White & Kingston (1975). They see a tendency for the scientific approach to become pedantic and the personal approach to end up in "rap sessions". Federici & Schuerger (1977) found little transfer effect between a high school course and a college general psychology course. Cole (1977) found that college students looking back at their high school course did not find it particularly helpful. In contrast, for example, college students rated their high school chemistry course highly as a preparation for college chemistry.

An alternative to the either-or curriculum is Wertheimer & Kasschau's text for high school. They attempt a compromise between

the approaches. For example, they take a current issue, race relations, and view it according to psychological theory and methods. As Schumacher (1976) comments, their approach is probably not as unique as they claim as at least some teachers are attempting to blend the two approaches.

Teachers of High School Psychology

Psychology is one of the few remaining high school subjects taught by academically unqualified teachers. The typical educational background of teachers is in social studies. In Georgia a teacher may have as few as two psychology courses (Kingston, 1977) and Epley's (1976) survey of Iowa teachers found that the typical instructor had four courses in psychology. A plausible but academically invalid reason for this situation is that psychology is a secondary offering of the teacher and is an elective within the social studies curriculum. Schools simply do not have full time psychology teachers much less a psychology department. There is little likelihood for teacher upgrading since technically their teaching certificates in social studies include the behavioral sciences, e.g. psychology. If New York State is any indicator, then the impetus for change and ultimately a certificate in psychology, must first come from college and university psychology departments (Note 1).

Enrollment Figures

Korn (1976) has cited that high school enrollments in psychology courses more than doubled between 1960 and 1970; Stahl

(1975, 1977) states that it is one of the fastest growing subject areas in Florida and Dembrot & Popplestone (1975) estimate that the recent national enrollment figure is more than half a million. Indications are that the growth trend is likely to continue into the next decade.

Considering the inadequate preparation of the teachers, and the place of psychology in the curriculum, there is good reason to be concerned about high school psychology. The academic-scientific-type course is an uncritical imitation of a college course and the personal growth approach originates from teacher inspiration and/or student requests. Obviously one has to start from where the current teachers are. However they are not at a point to cover competently the spectrum of general psychology much less to attempt to apply such an area as clinical psychology.

High school psychology needs a rationale, just as do the other disciplines within the curriculum. Current teachers are not qualified at this time to articulate such a rationale, e.g., purpose, organization and teaching methods. Current practices exhibit a shallow and superficial understanding of the course and little awareness or evidence of curriculum development. There is room for refinements of the current approaches or as indicated earlier a compromise between the two. There is also room for other alternatives.

An Alternative: A Graduate Training Program in the Psychology of Adolescent Development

In asking college students what they thought high school psychology should be about, frequent reference was made to

adolescence and its accompanying problems (Kirk, 1978). The featured article in Time magazine (1977) was entitled: "The High Schools are in Trouble". The article provided illustrative examples of three schools with troubled social climates and a decline in student academic interest and effort. An appropriate, manageable, and relevant high school curriculum would be the psychology of adolescent development and learning school subject matter. The program objectives are:

1. Deal with current adolescent concerns not handled by other subjects in the high school, and which if not attended to distract the adolescent from concentrating on his academic subjects.
2. Show how these current concerns around adolescence can be dealt with by means of the scientific principles and research in the area of adolescent development and subject-matter learning.

Obstacles to Implementing High School Training Program

Despite the inadequate preparation of teachers and increased student enrollments, there is little incentive for teacher upgrading and curriculum development. Technically and legally the social studies teachers, for the most part, are permanently certified. Additional courses, much less another degree, are not attractive to them. For teachers not permanently certified, a graduate degree program is attractive because it provides permanent certification (see Marist Survey results below). State education departments are not prodding teachers because of current financial and personnel

restrictions. Moreover, a certified curriculum in a new area follows upon initiation of college and university programs only after many years of experience. School boards are also reluctant to consider new programs during a period of retrenchment. Acknowledgment of these points was made by attendees at the recent APA Convention, Toronto, August 1978. It is premature at this time to seek approval for a graduate curriculum in psychology for high school teachers. The state education department as well as Marist administrators want tangible evidence of teacher interest in matriculating in such a degree program.

Marist Findings

In the spring of 1977 the Marist Teacher Education director surveyed representative area high schools. All of the nine schools offered psychology courses (total 38 sections). All the classes were taught by social studies teachers to juniors and seniors as an elective.

In the fall of 1978, 400 high school students and twenty-one teachers attended the Fourth Marist Psychology Day. At that time, on a written survey eleven teachers indicated they would be interested in graduate psychology courses and a lesser number in a master's degree. All of the teachers were permanently certified. (We had one request earlier in the year to offer a workshop.)

In the spring of 1978 I met with Teacher Education seniors at Marist and Vassar College. Half of each graduating class liked the curriculum and were interested in matriculating. The degree

for these people would provide permanent certification and they would be qualified to teach, e.g. social studies and psychology. There is some evidence therefore that both permanently and provisionally certified teachers are interested in the proposed graduate curriculum or at least in some graduate courses. In the spring of 1979 a graduate course will be offered to teachers titled "High School Psychology".

Note 1: Meeting with Vincent Gazetta, Director of the Bureau of Certification, State Education Department, 11/2/77 Albany, N.Y.

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